



Are We Enslaved to One Side of the Brain? - The Sickness of Modern Man

“It seems to me that we face very grave crises indeed and that, if we are to survive, we need not just a few new measures, but a complete change of heart and mind.”

Iain McGilchrist, The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World

There seems to be a sickness that has spread throughout society, and it has infected most people with a mindset that is not suitable for individual or social flourishing. In this video, we explore a fascinating hypothesis, put forth by the psychiatrist and neuroscience researcher Iain McGilchrist, that can help account for the sickness of the modern age. This hypothesis suggests that most people rely too heavily on one side of the brain, which is leading to a peculiar worldview, and a pathological way of being, that is characterized by stubbornness, a lack of empathy, a desire for power, and an overall disconnection from reality.

“Brains and minds are living, constantly adapting, interconnected systems. And they are conscious. A brain disease or mental illness, then, is a change in a person’s whole way of being in the world.”

Iain McGilchrist, The Matter with Things

To understand the mental pathology that has infected society we must begin with a basic understanding of the structure of the human brain, or specifically its bipartite nature. The word bipartite means “involving or made up of two entities”. The human brain is bipartite as it is divided into two asymmetrical hemispheres, the left hemisphere and the right hemisphere. This asymmetrical division is not unique to humans, but is found in every neuronal system, of every known creature, stretching back to the beginning of evolutionary history. Why is this? What purpose does it serve? Or as McGilchrist asks:

“Why are the two cerebral hemispheres asymmetrical? Do they really differ in any important sense? If so, in what way?”

Iain McGilchrist, The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World

Common in popular culture is the idea that the two hemispheres differ in what they do. For example, it is often said that the left hemisphere is locus of logic, analytic thought, language, and reason, while the right hemisphere is the locus of emotions, creativity, intuition, and artistic ability. But as McGilchrist notes:

“Just about everything that is said about the hemispheres in pop psychology is wrong because it rests on beliefs about what the hemispheres do, not about how they approach it . . .”

Iain McGilchrist, The Matter with Things

Both hemispheres play a role in virtually every human activity and in all mental processes and states. From language, to emotion, movement, thought, imagination, creativity, logic, and reason, all these activities are mediated by the operation of both hemispheres. Or as McGilchrist writes:

“. . . we will never learn anything about hemisphere differences if we wait for a situation in which one hemisphere is 100% responsible for whatever it is, and the other contributes nothing. It is always a matter of degree – a matter of asymmetry.”

Iain McGilchrist, The Matter with Things

To understand the primary difference between the two hemispheres it is helpful to examine a fundamental problem that all creatures face in the struggle to survive: We must eat, while also protecting ourselves from being eaten. In his book *The Matter with Things*, McGilchrist provides the example of a bird to show how the bipartite nature of the brain helps to solve this fundamental problem of survival. When a bird is searching for food, it must deploy a narrow, focused, and precise attention to find, and attack, the worms and bugs it eats. But if a bird only deployed this narrow attention its survival fitness would be low as every time it focused on finding food, it would be oblivious to its surroundings and easy prey for predators. To solve this problem a bird simultaneously deploys a more open, broad, and sustained attention to monitor its surroundings and to be on the lookout for potential threats. The simultaneous deployment of two types of attention was made possible by the evolution of the two brain hemispheres, or as McGilchrist writes:

“How on earth can you dispose your consciousness towards the world in two conflicting ways at once? The answer is the evolution of two neuronal masses, separate enough to function independently, but connected enough to work in concert with one another, each capable of sustaining consciousness on its own. In other words, a bipartite brain.”

Iain McGilchrist, The Matter with Things

In the bipartite brain, the left hemisphere specializes in the narrow and precisely focused attention that is necessary to obtain the resources needed to survive. But the utility of the left hemisphere’s attention extends beyond its ability to help us attain resources. In a more general sense, we use this type of attention to focus in on specific elements of our environment, in order to manipulate and

control them, in the service of a wide variety of ends. The right hemisphere, on the other hand, specializes in the broad, open, and sustained form of attention that keeps us on alert to potential threats. This form of attention, however, is also used to help us comprehend the world in its vast complexity and to integrate diverse elements of our experience into a cohesive whole. Together, these two hemispheres strike a balance between the need to control and manipulate our environment and the need to understand it. Or as McGilchrist explains:

“In humans the left hemisphere is designed for grasping, controls the right hand with which we grasp . . . and helps us manipulate, rather than understand, the world. It sees little, but what it does see seems clear. It is confident, tends to be black and white in its judgments, and jumps to conclusions. Since it is serving the predator in us, it has to if it is to succeed. It sees a linear relationship between the doer and the ‘done to’, between arrow and target. By contrast, the wide-open, vigilant, sustained attention of the right hemisphere, without preconception as to what it may find, is designed to look out for all the rest – whatever else might be going on in the world while we are busy grasping. Its purpose is to help us understand, rather than manipulate the world: to see the whole and how we relate to it. It is more exploratory, less certain: it is more interested in making discriminations, in shades of meaning.”

Iain McGilchrist, The Matter with Things

We do not notice the discrepancy between the two modes of attending to the world that are provided by the left and right hemispheres. We have evolved so that both forms of attention can be deployed simultaneously while our experience appears as a unified gestalt.

“If in everyday life we were aware of the discrepancies in the view, or ‘take’, on the world each hemisphere offers, it would render the immediate business of survival impracticable. For this reason, nature has taken care that these discrepancies should not be part of our everyday awareness.”

Iain McGilchrist, The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World

When both hemispheres work in harmony we function at optimal capacity. Sometimes, however, one of the hemispheres dominates and crowds out the contribution of the other. This may be a result of a physical injury to one of the hemispheres, such as occurs following a stroke. But physical changes to the brain are not necessary to effectuate an overreliance on one hemisphere. McGilchrist provides the analogy of using a radio to help elucidate how non-physical processes can result in one hemisphere dominating: Let’s say we buy a radio and at first we listen to a wide variety of stations across the spectrum. With time we increasingly tune into only one station and eventually we never turn the dial to explore what else is on. This does not imply that there is anything wrong with the physical components of the radio, we just never change the station. So it is with the brain: our lifestyle, habits and technological, cultural, and social trends can lead to a situation where we increasingly ‘tune in’ to one of the hemispheres and become overly reliant on its mode of attentional deployment. This situation can become so habitual that we don’t even realize that our experience is largely sculpted by one half of the brain and that we are ignoring the potential contributions of the other hemisphere.

McGilchrist suggests that in the modern day it is the left hemisphere that has come to dominate the experience of most people. We are a population of men and women who habitually rely on the

narrow and precise form of attention that is the forte of the left hemisphere and this is exerting a formative influence on the type of people we become. For how we attend to the world is a prime shaper of the way we experience it, and our experience, in turn, shapes our character. Relying on one side of the brain produces a different type of personality than the personality that would arise if we were to allow the optimal deployment of both hemispheres. Or as McGilchrist puts it:

“Things change according to the stance we adopt towards them, the type of attention we pay to them, the disposition we hold in relation to them. This is important because the most fundamental difference between the hemispheres lies in the type of attention they give to the world.”

Iain McGilchrist, The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World

What can account for this shift toward the left hemisphere’s take on the world? Or as McGilchrist asks:

“. . . why has one particular model [or one hemisphere’s take on the world] come to dominate us so badly that we hardly notice its pervasiveness?”

Iain McGilchrist, The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World

This shift towards a left hemisphere dominated experience can be attributed to several key factors. Firstly, there is the rise of the reductive-materialist paradigm of modern science. Reductionism, in the words of McGilchrist, “*assumes that the only way to understand the nature of anything we experience is by looking at the parts of which it appears to be made, and building up from there*”. While materialism is a philosophical position that asserts that matter is the sole, primary, and fundamental component of reality. In the reductive-materialist paradigm, the world, and everything in it, is made from tiny parts of matter and the purpose of science is to break down these larger wholes to their constituent material parts in order to understand how these mechanisms operate and how we can manipulate them.

Although many people are unfamiliar with the term “reductive materialism”, the assumptions embedded within this paradigm shape contemporary worldviews. This idea that all phenomena can be reduced to physical mechanisms has become a cornerstone of the modern zeitgeist, influencing what people believe and how they interact with the world around them. And this paradigm, which has dominated mainstream science for over a century, is tailor-made to the strengths of the left hemisphere, or McGilchrist explains:

“. . . science is heavily dependent on the exercise of what the left hemisphere offers. Science’s successes, in explaining how the world works and in helping us to control and manipulate that world to the extraordinary degree to which we now do, are unquestionable, and are dependent on precisely those specific capacities which the left hemisphere contributes, capacities of analysis and for identifying mechanisms.”

Iain McGilchrist, The Matter with Things

Modern technology is another factor making us reliant on the left hemisphere. As a species we have become so entwined with our technologies that most people spend more time using technology, than not. Most of these technologies, but especially computers, smartphones, and now virtual reality

devices, require the narrow and precise attention of the left hemisphere and inhibit the broad, sustained, and open attention of the right hemisphere. Furthermore, modern technology is built for the primary purpose of manipulating and controlling the environment, goals that align with the motivations of the left hemisphere. Or as McGilchrist explains:

“Technology is one expression of the desire for power and control over the world, which is of course the primary motivation of the left hemisphere, in which it repudiates the right hemisphere on which we rely for our sense of depth in every sense of the word.”

Iain McGilchrist, The Matter with Things

Another trend pushing us in the direction of the left hemisphere’s take on the world is the bureaucratization of society. As the state has grown in size, power, and scope, its bureaucratic tentacles have infiltrated all areas of society. Opportunities for spontaneity have declined and human life is now increasingly patterned by the need to check the boxes, and follow the rules and procedures of some government bureaucracy. An individual dominated by the left hemisphere’s take on the world will feel right at home in a world where following rules and procedures is the norm, for as McGilchrist explains “*the left hemisphere’s forte, its strong suit is following familiar procedures...*” (*The Matter With Things*)

The shift towards left hemisphere dominance is further exacerbated by a widespread move away from activities which promote the right hemisphere’s way of attending to the the world, be it time spent in nature, religious practices, appreciating art, or creative problem solving. These activities are not defined by a need to narrow down our focus to manipulate or control our environment, but instead permit the emergence of the broad and open attention of the right hemisphere. It is the right hemisphere’s attention which is needed to absorb the beauty of nature, appreciate the meaning implicit in a great work of art, it is crucial in the attempt to connect to the transcendent Other of religion, and it is essential in the process of a creative breakthrough. Or as McGilchrist explains:

“Certain kinds of mind-wandering are creative; narrow attention hampers creativity. Only turning off the spotlight of left hemisphere attention enables the more complex and diffuse arrays of neurones in the right hemisphere to work on solving the problem.”

Iain McGilchrist, The Matter with Things

These activities that rely on the power of the right hemisphere have been crowded out by pursuits mediated by technology and structured by the familiarity of bureaucratic rules and McGilchrist write:

“Increasing technologisation and bureaucratisation of life help to erode the more integrative modes of attention to people and things which might help us resist the advances of technology and bureaucracy, so that in this way they aid their own replication.”

Iain McGilchrist, The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World

All these trends have contributed to a dangerous situation. Most of us rely far too much on the left hemisphere and this is stunting the development of our character and creating a population of men and women ill-suited for the challenges of life.

“...there have been swings in the pendulum, the balance of power has shifted where it cannot afford to go – further and further towards the part-world created by the left hemisphere.”

Iain McGilchrist, The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World

In his books *The Master and His Emissary* and *The Matter With Things*, McGilchrist highlights many of the dangers associated with left hemisphere dominance. Much of this knowledge comes from a wealth of studies that have examined individuals with physical damage to the right side of the brain due to a stroke or other form of brain injury. But as McGilchrist notes, similar tendencies and character flaws are generated whether one relies on the left hemisphere due to a brain injury, or due to habits, and ways of life, that draw primarily on the potentials of the left hemisphere.

One problem associated with left hemisphere dominance is that the more we deploy the narrow form of attention that is used for manipulating the world, the more we look at the world as composed of objects to be exploited. The natural world becomes a set of resources, and other people become mere means, to be manipulated in the service of our goals. Left-hemisphere dominance, in other words, results in an excessive drive for power and control over both our physical and social environments, or as McGilchrist writes:

“The left hemisphere’s principal concern is utility. It is interested in what it has made, and in the world as a resource to be used.”

Iain McGilchrist, The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World

To make matters worse, while the left hemisphere is driven to manipulate the world and exert power over it, it is unwilling to take responsibility for the mistakes it makes in the process of this manipulation. Its narrow focus interferes with the ability to stand back and look at the bigger picture which is necessary to accurately assess where we have gone wrong, or as McGilchrist explains:

“The left hemisphere’s is the wilful consciousness, the one that makes things happen. Its purpose is clear: action towards a target that is centre-stage, taking possession of what is in full vision. But unfortunately it knows remarkably little about all the rest. So when things outside its ken happen, they logically must have been willed by someone else. They are someone else’s responsibility.”

Iain McGilchrist, The Matter with Things

Or as he writes in *The Master and His Emissary*:

“...the left hemisphere . . . may be unreasonably, even stubbornly, convinced of its own correctness.”

Iain McGilchrist, The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World

Another flaw of left hemisphere dominance, as has been revealed by studies of right hemisphere stroke patients, is that the left hemisphere's take on the world tends to lack empathy. The right hemisphere, as McGilchrist explains "*is superior at reading body language and emotion expressed in the face or voice. . . is better able to understand another's point of view [and] is essential for empathy.*" (*The Matter with Things*)

Left hemisphere dominance also leads to a disconnection from reality. For the left hemisphere is great at creating models of the world that can help it manipulate its environment, but in lacking the broad, sustained, and open form of attention that is the forte of the right hemisphere, it struggles to anchor itself in the world as a whole. Or as McGilchrist writes:

"...the right hemisphere is more in touch with reality, and the left hemisphere more concerned with the internal consistency of whatever virtual model of the world it happens to be working with at the time."

Iain McGilchrist, The Matter with Things

If McGilchrist's hypothesis is correct and most of us are overly reliant on the left hemisphere, this can account for many of our social ills. It can account for the rise of narcissistic individuals, as left hemisphere dominance is associated with lower levels of empathy. It can account for the relentless power seeking that many of us display, and it can account for the deformed character of many politicians and bureaucrats. For politicians and bureaucrats are particularly susceptible to left hemisphere dominance as their primary job is to adopt the bureaucratic mindset that attempts to control society through science and technology. This mindset leads to all the flaws of left hemisphere dominance including stubbornness, arrogance, deceitfulness, a lack of empathy, a disconnection from reality and an unwillingness to take responsibility for mistakes. Or as McGilchrist explains:

" . . . a culture that exemplifies the qualities of the left hemisphere's world attracts to itself, in positions of influence and authority, those whose natural outlook is similar. People with certain [left hemisphere] traits will be attracted to, and be deemed especially suitable for, employment in the areas of science, technology and administration which have, during the last hundred years, been immensely influential in shaping the world we live in . . ."

Iain McGilchrist, The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World

So long as most of us remain possessed by one side of our brain and so long as we allow ourselves to be ruled by those who suffer most acutely from this pathology, we place ourselves in grave danger. Our ability to control the world, and to exert power over nature, may continue to grow, but our understanding of the world we seek to control will not keep pace, and this is a recipe for disaster, or as McGilchrist writes:

"The problem is that the very brain mechanisms which succeed in simplifying the world so as to subject it to our control militate against a true understanding of it. Meanwhile, compounding the problem, we take the success we have in manipulating it as proof that we understand it. But that is a logical error: to exert power over something requires us only to know what happens when we pull the levers, press the button, or utter the spell. The fallacy is memorialised in the myth of the sorcerer's apprentice...while we have succeeded in coercing the world to our will to an extent unimaginable even a few

generations ago, we have at the same time wrought havoc on that world precisely because we have not understood it.”

Iain McGilchrist, The Matter with Things